DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 202 020 CS 206 291

AUTHOR Jones, William
TITLE Revision for Basic Writers.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (32nd, Dallas, TX, March 26-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Creative Writing; Descriptive Writing; *Expository Writing; Higher Education; *Narration; Peer Evaluation; *Teaching Methods; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Revision (Written Composition)

ABSTRACT

Basic writers can be taught to write effective expository prose if they are taught to revise, and they can make considerable progress if they are given opportunities to write narration before tackling the complexities of exposition. Narratives come easily to basic writers and allow them complete control over subject matter and language. The responses of classmates, both oral and written, can help basic writers develop a much needed sense of themselves as writers. They will begin to acquire tentative indications of their abilities as communicators, understanding that concern over clarity and grammar are the concerns not solely of writing teachers but of all listeners and readers. Specific procedures developed for a wide range of grammar and sentence structure problems can help students monitor and eliminate such problems, so that communication becomes the major concern in all writing assignments in the second semester of the course. Students will still lack the conventions of expository writing, however, so instructors must make as explicit as possible what the conventions are and give students numerous opportunities to become familiar with them. (Guides for group work, problem monitoring, and revision are appended.) (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED202020

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Revision for Basic Writers

William Jones

I want to begin by making two simple assertions about basic writers: 1) Basic writers can be taught to write effective expository prose if they are taught to revise and 2) they can be moved a considerable distance in learning to do so if they are given opportunities to write narration in order to become comfortable writers before attacking the difficulties of exposition. The expository modes seem inappropriate starting points for basic writers since effective exposition requires an intricate handling of language, a careful attention to the clarity of statements and an elaboration and extension of ideas that basic writers are initially unprepared to attend to. Teaching the conventions of exposition demands an elaborate pedagogy. Teaching the writing of narration does not. Narratives come with such ease to basic writers that narratives seem almost native enterprises. Ezra Pound said that poetry is native to the human voice box. Perhaps storytelling resides there too, for while basic writers may not turn out faultlessly polished, precise literary short stories, they do regularly write stories from their personal experience that are often competent and, sometimes, both moving and memorable, characteristics that are not often ascribed to the work of basic writers.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
William Jones
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS206291

Narratives allow basic writers to function much as competent, experienced writers do, for narratives allow basic writers authority over subject matter and control over language. Students may, for the first time, working in the narrative-descriptive mode, be in charge of their writing, creating situations in which writing instructors can deal with language with unusual profit, since instruction can be directed to increase the effectiveness of already creditable student writing. Students can accumulate genuine uncharitable, honestly earned success. Success does not mean that grades will be inordinately high. They may be most frequently average, but while writing in the narrative-descriptive mode students can develop realistic measures for their performances as writers.

Basic writers need to develop a sense of themselves as writers, but to do so they need not rely solely on the comments and grades of instructors. They can regularly have the responses of their classmates, both orally and in writing. When students begin to see that their inexperience does not automatically render them incompetent, they are generally receptive to sharing their writing with others. Working in groups, reading their papers to each other, telling each other what is effective and what is not, what needs expanding, what

should be deleted—as students reckon with what they have written, they begin to acquire tentative indications of their abilities as communicators, understanding that concern over clarity and grammaticality are not the concerns solely of writing teachers but of all listeners and readers who cast themselves as receptive, responsive members of the writer's audience.

(Examine and explain how to use Standard Questions for Group Work using the transparency. See Appendix I Students use the questions to direct their work in groups.)

Group work, using these questions to structure peer assessment and inquiry, is an important early step in preparing students for revision work, for it assists basic writers to deal with writing in terms of ideas, information and arrangement, not merely in terms of the mechanics of item grammar, sentence structure and the mechanics of punctuation. It is worth noting, too, that basic writers are often initially uncertain about what to say about matters of grammar. In part, this uncertainty grows out of school experiences that emphasize handbook information about language instead of recognizing the expertise that native-speakers of English and competent bi-linguals all have in the handling of English. Students are, however, well able

to help each other make decisions about extending ideas, supplying additional information or about organization.

The facility with which students themselves manage narration and description allows instructors themselves to concentrate on the elimination of recalcitrant and exotic problems of language, particularly matters that are generated naturally in narratives and descriptions. Two of the most difficult to eliminate are ill-managed reported speech and non-standard-dialect-influenced verb sequencing problems. Added to these are the more ordinary but no less stubborn matters of subject-verb agreement and sentence structure problems, especially those associated with parallel structures.

I do not recommend ordinary handbook and workbook exercises for dealing with such problems but propose instead a monitoring system that assists students in recognizing the presence of problems and then offers a procedure for systematically monitoring and eliminating them.

(Use the transparency, How to Monitor Recalcitrant Grammatical Problems. See Appendix II.)

Students, like their instructors, must be able to recognize the presence of language problems in their own writing. Those problems must leap from the page for students

just as they do for writing instructors.

Let me illustrate how this can be done by first explaining what I mean by linguistic signals: Linguistic signals are usually function words—prepositions, relative pronouns, subordinators—words that establish grammatical and syntatic relations in sentences.

(Examine three transparencies: Illustration of Linguistic Signals, Monitoring a Verb Problem and Monitoring Parallel Structure Problems. See Appendices III, IV and V.)

Specific procedures may be developed for a wide range of grammar and sentence structure problems so that the second semester can begin with students having mastered or begun to master specific procedures for managing specific language problems. This makes it possible for the second semester to be treated as a semester in which communication becomes the major concern in all writing assignments. The expository modes become the vehicles for expression While the rhetorical mechanism may move from process papers to definition to classification and cause-effect and argumentation, the matter of effective communication can be made the primary and sustained concern throughout the course. Students can move from assignment to assignment concerned with focusing on the message being presented, building coherence, managing

sentence grammar and on attempting to write sensibly and intelligently.

What must be accepted is that students can put language on a page. They have proven this with a full semester of hard earned success. What they most often lack while writing narratives and descriptions at the beginning of the second semester is familiarity with the conventions of writing in expository modes. Writing exposition is not a native enterprise the way that writing narration is. Instructors, therefore, must make as explicit as possible what the conventions are and give students numerous opportunities to familiarize themselves with them. (Use the transparency to illustrate the point: Statements and Questions to Guide Revision. See Appendix VI.)

The guide not only delineates and defines the concerns for each writing assignment, it directs the marking of papers and influences what students discuss in their groups. Using the revision guide in these ways—to share assignments and to focus the students' second semester writing, to direct group assessment and collaboration, to guide my marking and the students' rewriting of their papers—very quickly the quality of writing is raised.

Appendix I

STANDARD QUESTIONS FOR GROUP WORK

1) What has the writer managed particularly well? Are there well-chosen words or striking phrases that you can point to?

2) What do you want to hear more about?

3) What should be deleted?
What should be rearranged?

4) Are there sentences or parts of sentences that do not seem clear? What does the writer say she or he means?

5) Are there mechanical matters that need attention?

Appendix II

How to Monitor Recalcitrant Grammatical Problems

1) Help each student name his or her specific grammar problems. (Students must recognize that the problems they have are specific, usually limited, individual, even idiosyncratic.)

2) Help students to think about grammar problems in fresh ways. Assist them in writing descriptions of the grammatical problems that they have. Each explanation should grow out of a careful examination of writing that displays the particular problem. The explanations should <u>not</u> echo explanations typically found in grammar handbooks.

3) Help students recognize the linguistic signals
   - A) that indicate the possible presence of a problem and
   - B) that indicate that students must put their monitoring skills into practice.

4) Give students both mechanical and realistic practice in monitoring problems. Practice should be copious throughout the course.

   Mechanical practice, provided by sentences taken from student writing, gives students opportunities to familiarize themselves with the techniques of monitoring.

   Realistic practice transfers monitoring to actual student writing, principally by encouraging the writing of several drafts and the rewriting of each graded paper.

APPENDIX II (CONT'D.)

(A SEMESTER OF SENTENCE CORRECTING, USING PROBLEMS CULLED FROM STUDENT WRITING, IS GENERALLY EFFECTIVE IN REMOVING A LARGE NUMBER OF PROBLEMS. WHEN SUCH DOES NOT HAPPEN, I USE A CHART CALLED THE EDITING CHECK LIST TO MAKE THESE STEPS VISUAL AND TO RECORD STEPS 1, 2 AND 3.)

APPENDIX III

ILLUSTRATIONS OF LINGUISTIC SIGNALS

BELIEVE THAT THINK THAT SAY THAT UNDERSTAND THAT KNOW THAT	SIGNALS FOR A FOLLOWING CLAUSE
BECAUSE UNLESS ALTHOUGH WHILE SINCE	SIGNALS FOR A FOLLOWING CLAUSE AND COMMA
AND BUT FOR YET	SIGNALS FOR COORDINATED STRUCTURE
THEY THEIR THEM	SIGNALS FOR PLURAL ANTECEDENTS

APPENDIX IV

MONITORING A VERB PROBLEM, RELYING ON A SIGNAL

FORMS OF TO HAVE + REGULAR FORM OF THE PAST PARTICIPLE

HAVE
HAS
HAD
HAVING

} SIGNALS FOR A FOLLOWING PAST PARTICIPLE

FORMS OF TO BE + REGULAR FORM OF THE PAST PARTICIPLE

AM
ARE
IS
WAS
WERE
BE
BEEN
BEING

} SIGNALS FOR A FOLLOWING PAST PARTICIPLE

APPENDIX V

MONITORING PARALLEL STRUCTURE PROBLEMS

1) RECOGNIZE THE POSSIBLE PRESENCE OF A PROBLEM BY NOTING THE SIGNAL. (THE SIGNAL IS A CONJUNCTION, USUALLY AND BUT OR OR BUT SOMETIMES FOR, YET.)

2) DETERMINE THE NUMBER OF SENTENCES IMBEDDED IN THE IMPROPERLY-WRITTEN SENTENCE. (THERE WILL BE AT LEAST TWO SENTENCES.)

3) WRITE EACH IMBEDDED SENTENCE SEPARATELY. ("DE-COMBINE" THE SENTENCE, STARTING EACH SENTENCE WITH THE WORDING FROM THE FIRST SENTENCE.)

4) DECIDE WHETHER EACH SENTENCE IS ACCEPTABLE STRUCTURALLY AND SEMATICALLY NOTING THE CHANGES THAT DE-COMBINING FORCED.

5) RE-COMBINE THE SENTENCES, DELETING THE REPEATED LANGUAGE THAT DE-COMBINING PRODUCED. (READ THE SENTENCE SEVERAL TIMES TO MAKE SURE IT READS PROPERLY. ADJUST THE SENTENCE SO THAT IT IS ENTIRELY ACCEPTABLE.)

APPENDIX VI

STATEMENTS AND QUESTIONS TO GUIDE REVISION

1) A COMMITMENT TO WRITE CLEARLY AND INTERESTINGLY.

2) AN UNDERSTANDING THAT A TOPIC SENTENCE SIMPLY ESTABLISHES AN INITIAL COMMITMENT TO AN IDEA BUT THAT EACH SUBSEQUENT STATEMENT PLACED IN THE PARAGRAPH OBLIGATES THE WRITER TO DECIDE WHETHER IT REQUIRES EXTENSION OR CLARIFICATION.

3) AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT INTERFERES WITH EFFECTIVE EXPOSITION, USING THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

   A) COHERENCE: IS EACH PARAGRAPH COHERENT? DOES STATEMENT B GROW OUT OF STATEMENT A? DOES STATEMENT C GROW OUT OF B AND D OUT OF C AND SO FORTH? IS THERE COHERENCE BETWEEN PARAGRAPHS?

   B) REPETITION AND REDUNDANCY: IS THE MESSAGE BEING PURSUED? DO SUBSEQUENT SENTENCES ELABORATE AND EXTEND THE MESSAGE OR HAS THE THE MESSAGE BECOME STATIC AND REPETITIVE? DO REPETITIONS AND REDUNDANCIES MAKE THE LANGUAGE STYLISTICALLY UNATTRACTIVE?

   C) SENSE: DO STATEMENTS MAKE SENSE? ARE THEY TRUE OR DO THEY OFFEND COMMON SENSE?

   D) LANGUAGE: IS THE LANGUAGE SYNTACTICALLY CONVENTIONAL, FREE OF IDIOSYNCRACTIC FEATURES WHICH DISTRACT THE READER?

   E) GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS: IS THE TEXT FREE OF PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE MECHANICS OF GRAMMAR, USAGE, PUNCTUATION AND SPELLING?